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C O N F I D E N T I A L SEOUL 001273

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 06/26/2018
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [KS](#)
SUBJECT: PARK JIN: BEEF PROTESTS A RESULT OF "TOO MUCH
DEMOCRACY"

Classified By: POL M/C Joseph Y. Yun, Reasons 1.4 (b,d).

¶1. (C) Summary: Grand National Party (GNP) Representative Park Jin spent most of his June 18 dinner with ASD James Shinn discussing domestic politics. Park described the current political situation as a "crisis," and said the Lee Myung-bak Administration would have to handle the upheaval very carefully or the turmoil would continue throughout the next five years. Park said the protests have brought to light two issues that the government needs to find a way to deal with. The first is the degree to which Koreans are networked and sharing information over the internet. The second major challenge is to deal with the challenge the protests pose to Korea's democratic governance. Park said Alliance issues would have to wait until things "settle down."

"Land of the Morning Crisis"

¶2. (C) GNP Representative Park Jin said Korea is experiencing an "extraordinary" crisis. In response to ASD Shinn's question about how the crisis came about, Park said it would take a doctoral thesis to explain the reasons for the recent protests over the impending resumption of U.S. beef imports into Korea. Park said part of the reason was that President Lee went to the U.S. too soon after taking office. He should have waited until he settled in, but that just was not possible. Yonsei University Professor Lee Jung-hoon, also at the dinner, said a lot of the public angst was rooted in Lee's personnel choices. Park concurred and said the impression was that President Lee was leading a government of the wealthy dictating policy to the common people.

¶3. (C) Lee said that the perception that U.S. beef is dangerous seems to be dissipating. The unions are moving on to other issues. Park noted that there were also increasing calls to stop the "lawlessness" of the protests. Park also cautioned, however, that President Lee had to handle the situation very carefully or it would plague him for the rest of his term.

"Too Much Democracy"

¶4. (C) Representative Park said that the protests presented a very serious challenge to Korean democracy. The democratic

movement, he explained, had progressed at breakneck speed and now people thought that massive demonstrations was the proper way to communicate with the government. Park speculated that Korea had "too much democracy." Mary Beth Morgan, Korea Country Team Director, asked if Korean constituents felt as natural bringing complaints to their representatives as do Americans. Park said that he got massive amounts of email every day, but, when making policy decisions, he weighted his constituents' opinion about 30 percent and national opinion at about 70 percent.

"Urban Guerrillas"

15. (C) Both men said that the degree to which Koreans are networked and sharing information via the internet has fueled the protests and left the government wondering how to respond. Cites like Agora Forum on Daum and Afreeca allow users to post like webcasts and share information and, in the case of U.S. beef, rumor. Park called this trend "technological urban guerrilla civil disobedience." In order to address this issue, President Lee decided to reinstate an office on technology set up former President Roh Moo-hyun, but closed down by the Lee Administration for being too liberal. (Note: On June 19 the Blue House did, in fact, announce that Kim Chul-kyun, a former vice president at Daum, to assume a new position designed to monitor public opinion on the internet.)

Alliance Issues on the Backburner

16. (C) ASD Shinn tried several times to turn the conversation toward Alliance issues, but Park seemed understandably distracted and consumed by the domestic political situation. Park expressed regret that these problems came at the beginning of a new relationship between the U.S. and the ROK. Professor Lee mentioned OPCON and said that he hoped the two governments could reconsider the transfer decision. ASD Shinn replied that the transfer was both a sign of confidence in and a huge opportunity for the ROK military. In order to meet the requirements of the transfer, there was a long way to go as there was a lot of procurement and training that would ultimately make the military stronger. Morgan pointed out that the roadmap was very much on track.

17. (U) ASD Shinn has cleared this message.
VERSHBOW